Lafayette North's Greatest Asset

If Karl Breaux has his way, the North will rise again.

By Leslie Turk

Lynn Guidry got a phone call one recent morning from his good friend Karl Breaux. Breaux was calling Guidry, a co-chairman of the Redevelopment Lafayette North project, to apologize for having missed a public meeting on the initiative the night before. Breaux, a committee member, wasn't able to miss work at his north Lafayette grocery store on that particular night.

"He said, 'Lynn, I just wanted you to know I'm committed to this project for the next 50 years,'" Guidry recalls Breaux saying.

Breaux never doubted it, and he is more grateful now than ever to have the 36-year-old Breaux by his side. When the Lafayette North project was launched, its organizers never dreamed that they would face so much opposition and controversy — one group has even started a secession movement — for trying to rebuild what has long been the impediment of the parish. The project is a five-pronged initiative to address the infrastructure, land use and urban design, human resources, public safety and economic development needs of the northern part of the parish.

The soft-spoken and polite almost too-fiat Breaux, co-chairman of the project's infrastructure committee, has been the calm after the storm — and in many ways during it. Guidry says, "It's nice to watch him in a meeting. Karl brings a calmness to it. And it kind of radiates that's what he's doing. It's hard for a meeting to get chaotic when Breaux is in the room. Guidry says, 'I don't think he would let that happen.'"

But Breaux is no pushover. "We're going to win some, and we're going to lose some," says the executive manager of Breaux's Mart. "There's some political posturing going on there."

The opposition movement is a small one, Breaux insists, made up mostly of people who have not had much involvement with community efforts in the past. "If they had a plan, if I could see that they have a better plan than we have, I'd drop what we're doing like a hot potato," he says, adding that some of them seem predispanded to oppose just about anything. "They might be out there next week trying to cancel Mother's Day," he says.

"We've got to take it slow, and man we've got some wonderful people — Joe Dutrieu, Lynn Guidry, Karl Breaux, Fred Freytag, Steve Duhon, there are so many of them," Breaux says. Breaux also says the city-parish administration has followed through on its promises up to this point.

In the early 1990s Breaux did missionary work in south-ern Mexico and parts of northern Guatemala amid extreme social unrest. He chose not to continue that work after he married his family but since then he has been involved with a range of organizations, crafting his parents with insight into a sense of community. And in the process, says Guidry, Breaux has become the best kind of role model a community could hope for.

Breaux currently is working with UL assistant professor of architecture Tom Streetman on the Sinieux Street redesign project in north Lafayette and has been honored for his efforts to promote the French language in Louisiana. "He speaks nothing but French to his 2 1/2-year-old daughter, Madeleine Ellen, leaving the English to his wife.

Breaux was only 5 years old when he joined his father, Wallace, at the store that Wallace founded in 1934 at the same Moss Street location where it exists today. "That was my birthday present, pretty much an apron and a ladder," Karl says. Today, Karl and two of his brothers, Wally and Philip, are involved in operating the store, along with their father.

The family employs a number of high school students and requires that they have at least a 2.5 grade point aver-

age before being hired. "If their grades are below a C, average, they get paid off until they bring them back up," Karl Breaux says. "We've had a couple of people try to try the policy and they found out. We've got policies, you know."

Most of the youths do bring their grades back up, he says, and 75 percent of the high school workers go on to college. Breaux's Mart, which surpasses the national average for grocery stores sales per square foot, is building a new Acadia-

nile-style store in the back of its Moss Street site, adding some 4,000 to 5,000 square feet of space. The old store will be demolished for parking. The family also plans to open a second location in Carencro in a few years. "We are looking for expansion opportunities right now," Breaux says.

Breaux also has his own experimental company, Breaux Brothers Inc. He operates the business out of his home, which allows him to spend mornings with his daughter, while his wife, Suzanne, teaches school. While the new role has been rewarding, he has found firsthand to be quite a challenge. "It's a lot easier running a supermarket — and a supermarket is hard to run, than taking care of a 10-year-old. Most men just don't realize that," Breaux says.

Breaux's afternoons and weekends are spent at Breaux's Mart, where it is rare for him to not know a custo-

mer's name: "When I go to work it's basically to go visit with my friends. But it's his heartbeat. It helps when you love your job," he says.

Lynn Guidry is one of those shoppers. "It's kind of an un-

usual situation," Guidry says. "You just feel good after you're around him."

Photo by Vera Beattie